



The Films of Vincente Minnelli: Part II

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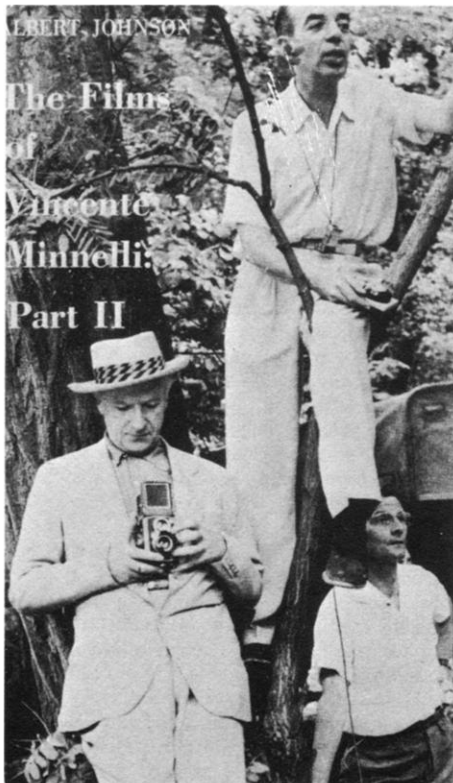
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Cecil Beaton (with camera) and Vincente Minnelli (in tree) on location in Paris during the shooting of GIGI.

If a director's interests in the art of the film are identified with a particular genre, it is extremely difficult for critics to accept his experiments with other material. Vincente Minnelli's tendency to creatively indulge his curiosity about the special challenges of light comedy and drama has only brought taunts from his critical detractors, who are inclined to dismiss his failures with little insight into the most inescapable hazard of directing, either on stage or screen—the inept script. Minnelli is the only director in Hollywood at present who is not primarily devoted to the fash-

ionably squalid school of cinema, and the worlds that his films create upon the screen are never completely real because they are always environments in which art is too omnipresent. Minnelli seems old-fashioned to the contemporary converts to neorealism, because he adheres to a belief that the foremost duty of the cinema is to astonish. It has been the aim of this article to point out the achievements possible with this method. One must also, however, call attention to the very real dilemma of remaining a stylist in an era of screen realism in Hollywood. Although Minnelli has many followers in the cinematic world, he is much more appreciated in European film circles than in his own country. Besides such newcomers as Kubrick, Lumet, Delbert Mann, and Ritt, Minnelli's work often appears needlessly commercial. But none of these younger men would be interested in handling the subject matter of Minnelli's films unless they had control of the script. Perhaps this is Minnelli's chief flaw; in a time of loud intimidations of screen writers by producers and directors, he seems to have a very genuine respect for the screen writer. Some of the most famous screen writers in Hollywood have been guilty of supplying him with the most obvious contrivances since the days of Elinor Glyn, and Minnelli has been content simply to film these scripts with the most theatrical flourishes he can manage. No matter how labored the script, Minnelli's film images always suddenly burst into life at certain points, and one senses that his material ceases to interest him before and after these moments. To those who have discerned this same trait in the latest films of such directors as Renoir, Huston, Wyler, and Ford, it may be conjectured that the atmosphere of improvisation — of on-the-spot changes of business and characterizations preferred by these veteran film directors while shooting a film—may account for the peculiarly uneven quality of the completed film as a whole. Minnelli is equally inclined to prefer the spontaneous, unexpected revelation about some aspect of personality, or the visually striking image which may occur to him in the middle of his tasks, and besides, his flair for décor and costume arrangement has not dimin-



ished. The backgrounds in Minnelli's films always seem about to reveal a wall inscribed with "Vermeer was here"; he cannot leave life as it is—he is a rearranger of the out-of-place, as he sees it, in décor as well as in characterization: *intensifying* the commonplace is his forte.

Late in 1952, Minnelli was aided in his interest in satire by writers Betty Comden and Adolph Green, and *The Band Wagon*, his next film, was praised because of its sly wittiness. The center of the praise was "The Girl-Hunt Ballet." Producer Arthur Freed was responsible for the idea of a dance parody on the bloodthirsty detective stories by Mickey Spillane, who was then enjoying a "literary" vogue. Minnelli read the Spillane books, all of them filled with sex and mayhem, and he has said that he emerged "in a state of trance. Almost every chapter was a parody of itself, and lent easily to the patterns of musical spoofing."

"The Girl-Hunt Ballet" is quite stylized. From its beginning, with a tattoo of machine-gun bullets cutting the curtains, there is a visually exciting quality about it, as a great backdrop of the big city is revealed, with silhouetted skyscrapers and red fire escapes. Fred Astaire, white-suited as usual, speaks the pseudo-tough narration of the Spillane hero. The salon episode in the ballet, with its 18th-century drawings upon the wall; Cyd Charisse in black sequins against sets of intermingling gray, purple, black, and lavender; and the dance upon the Times Square subway platform, with running, black-clad gunmen somersaulting, firing pistols, and falling dead upon the smooth floor—these things hit the viewer with sporadic effectiveness, for the parody is spotty, a succession of amusing jibes elaborated and shown, but without consistent humor. It is only when the lyric hero and heroine get into the "Dem Bones Cafe" that the ballet comes to life. When the gangsters and their molls break into wordless, ecstatic cries, they create a scene of theatrical lowlife with

THE BAND WAGON:

Stylized Oedipus: Jack Buchanan.

Stylized merriment: Jack Buchanan, Nanette Fabray, Oscar Levant, Fred Astaire

Stylized Spillane: Fred Astaire, Cyd Charisse, Shelly Manne.



BRIGADOON: *The lyric hero and heroine*
(Cyd Charisse and Gene Kelly).

some of the ribaldry of John Gay's world. Charisse dances erotically with Astaire, her red garment sparkling through the camera's hazed lens. (This dream-role of barroom jazz seductress is peculiarly her own; compare her similar work in *Singin' in the Rain* and *Meet Me in Las Vegas*.) Creators of "The Girl-Hunt Ballet," in addition to the dancers, were Edwin B. Willis and Keogh Gleason, the set decorators; Michael Kidd, the choreographer; and Roger Edens, whose arrangements for Arthur Schwartz's score were exemplary.

However, the film does not thrive today because of the ballet-parody alone. Its satire of some incredibly ornate productions of "Oedipus Rex" and "Faust," as enacted by Jack Buchanan, and the rousing horseplay of "That's Entertainment" were other additions to the tradition of the musical.

Without a doubt, *The Long, Long Trailer* (1953), a comic vehicle for the television favorites Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, was something of a vacation. It is an absurdly pleasant film, and Minnelli's last encounter with the normal-sized screen. There is, ironically enough, a moment in the film that offers an interesting parallel to the car-hysteria sequence from *The Bad and the Beautiful*, and it is also photographed by Surtees, slyly parodying himself: asleep in the

trailer, Lucille Ball is awakened by flashing lights from cars along the highway, police sirens and pistol shots. There was also an enigmatically grotesque characterization by one of Ball's relatives, referred to as "Poor Grace" (Connie Van), seen all too briefly.

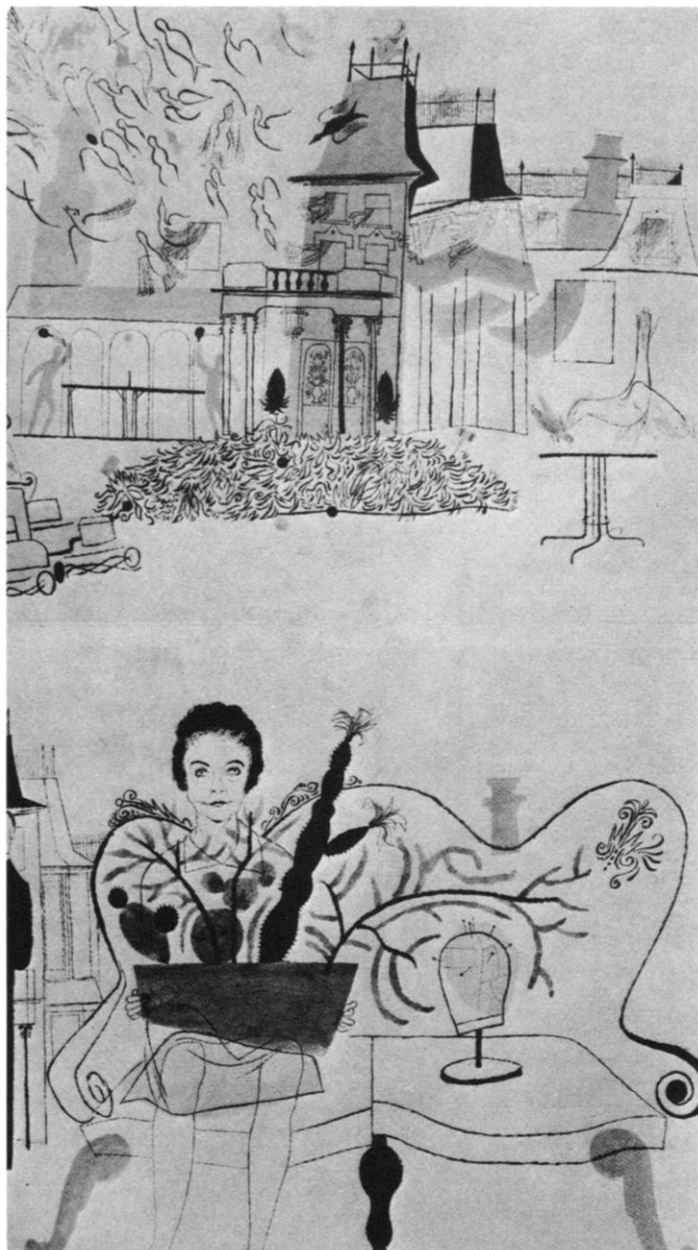
Since *Brigadoon* (1953), all of Minnelli's films have been in color and CinemaScope. CinemaScope, with its possibilities for more detailed photographic backgrounds and expansive scenic effects, was exciting for him on a purely experimental level, but, unfortunately, the wide screen merely enlarged the errors of the production. Minnelli's New York cocktail-lounge sequence, full of chatter and frenetic characters, was highly praised, and rightly so, but the changes in transposition of the Lerner-Loewe fantasy from stage to screen tampered with the very aspects of the play and score which might have made *Brigadoon* one of the best film musicals of the decade. The pitfall lay in trying to integrate into an already complete work of lyric art what had proven to be successful in a previous musical. Unfortunately, Gene Kelly's Cohanesque dances, as pleasant as they were in *An American in Paris*, were not satisfactory substitutes for Agnes De Mille's stage dances for *Brigadoon*: too many American cinema-goers knew and loved the stage musical to accept any drastic differences. The play was not treated cinematically either, and all of the Scottish sequences were interior reproductions. The film became rather shoddy fantasy, saved only momentarily by the New York sequence, a dance-duet to "The Heather on the Hill" by Kelly and Charisse, and the restoration of Van Johnson to the musical, in a triumphant song-and-dance number with Kelly.

Perhaps Minnelli was anxious to get started on *The Cobweb* (1954), which is as therapeutically stylized in its treatment of neuropsychiatric patients as *The Snake Pit* was patently pseudo-documentary in its approach. *The Cobweb*'s faults are more than balanced by its visual excellences, but the esoteric, unsympathetic characters are not adequately motivated, and the sanitarium itself, a haunting architectural whimsy, is like a drawing by Mary Petty, where

the sets and interiors (by Preston Ames and Keogh Gleason) place the characters in a world of mental illness not entirely free of fashionability, a playground for healthy American neuroticisms, full of hints and mishaps. But there is a correctly tense aura of madness over the entire film, and Leonard Rosenman's turbulently atonal score captures a tormented, sharp-edged nervousness. Several images remain long after the plot has dissolved: the wig-sequence between Lillian Gish and Richard Widmark, dominated by the actress' pantomimic gifts; and the emergence from a crowded theater by the young lovers (Susan Strasberg and John Kerr), briefly poignant and without dialogue, as Strasberg imperceptibly recovers from her ochlophobia. In this film, the diffuse screenplay is constantly kept alive by pictorial mannerism. There is a Guignol quality in the sudden view of a patient (Edgar Stehli) with slashed wrists, staring over his rumpled bedding; a cool-eyed blonde enviously appraises Gloria Grahame in a theater lobby, giving a routine sequence a quite unexpected vitality; and, finally, there is a memorable image of Widmark moving brokenly down a rain-swept riverbank as searchlights throw a red-white glow across the water, like liquid fire. *The Cobweb*, as a production, is a sort of schizoid showcase, sometimes mature in its approach to complex motivations on an intellectual plane. It fails to succeed entirely, because it reaches out in too many intriguing directions: psychopathology, the therapeutic process, administrative conflicts in the clinic, and marital problems. Most of the film's philosophy sounds plausible enough, but the reasons for the mental diseases of the patients (particularly Oscar Levant, Sandra Descher, Jarma Lewis, and Edgar Stehli) are allowed to drop behind the cobwebby plot, which spins out for two hours, illuminated here and there by Minnelli's careful attentiveness to minute details of characterization (notice Lauren Bacall's mute concern about emptying an ashtray). And in a realm where library draperies, adorned with David Stone Martin's masterful drawings, could stir up such a tempest, it was irritating never to see those drapes of wrath completed.



THE COBWEB:
 (Top) *The wig-sequence*
 (Richard Widmark and Lillian Gish).
 (Bottom) *Love and melancholia*
 (Lauren Bacall, Richard Widmark,
 and John Kerr).



THE COBWEB:
Two of the many drawings made for the production by David Stone Martin. These were supposed to be interpretations of the sanitarium and fellow patients made by the melancholy adolescent, Stevie (John Kerr) for use on draperies for the clinic's library. These drawings illustrate Minnelli's use of the artist's eye in planning his productions, the touch of a stylist rather than a technician.

KISMET:
Arabian Nights
 exercise: The
 "Not Since Nineveh"
 number (Dolores
 Gray and
 dancers Wonci Lui,
 Reiko Sato
 and Pat Dunn).



Kismet (1955) was extraordinarily beautiful (Preston Ames' sets and magnificent costumes by Tony Duquette) but alarmingly lifeless. The production looked promising, but a tight shooting schedule and a series of difficulties with the weather (a massive procession sequence had to be staged indoors, with less effect) seemed to reduce the original concept of the film to routine musical status. Only two numbers were worthy of attention, and these were "Fate," sung by Howard Keel while some dervishes twirled outside a mosque, and "Not Since Nineveh," a marvelous Arabian Nights exercise in broad daylight, sung by Dolores Gray, with some brilliant dancers performing choreography by Jack Cole.

Minnelli went to France for the arduous task of making *Lust for Life* (1955), the story of Vincent Van Gogh. It is an odd film, beautifully photographed in authentic locales, particularly Arles and the Borinage, and Kirk Douglas' performance was more convincing than expected. However, the essential gloom and depression of Van Gogh's story, constantly at cinematic odds with the bursts of color in the paintings, the obvious fictionalizations and the paradox of all

the American and British voices in the French surroundings, made *Lust for Life* rather innocuous as a human document.

Lust for Life was filled with images of Van Gogh in Arles—black crows fluttering across yellow fields, the artist screaming in agony at a taunting mob outside his window, or running down a coal-strewn hill in the excellent Borinage sequences. But finally, the film is simply a noble experiment. Van Gogh's story was one which demanded the dignity of tragedy, one which could not compromise with a need to simply entertain, and even Minnelli could not overcome the appalling failure of the script to understand the humanity and, often, the sameness of a genius.

The most forgivable thing about *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) is that the original author, Robert Anderson, was responsible for the screen play as well. The film's power was completely destroyed by the movie censorship code, which was expected, but apparently MGM decided that the play's success guaranteed a large audience regardless. The central theme of false accusation in a New England prep school was re-



Kirk Douglas as Van Gogh in *LUST FOR LIFE*.

tained, but the homosexual implications were eliminated, making the hero, Tom Lee (John Kerr), a victim of bullying more than anything else. The basis for his persecution was an ability to knit, and this device tended to rob the film of inner conviction. If, however, the purposes of the film are concentrated upon, and the play completely dismissed from one's memory, it becomes evident that *Tea and Sympathy* as a film is simply an attack upon insensitivity toward others and the conformities demanded in adolescent male society. The film's interest as a piece of popular drama then becomes more absorbing. A fantastic ritual by night, when the upperclassmen attack other students and tear off their pajamas by torchlight, is at once theatrical and brutally symbolic of senseless conformities; the sequence in which Tom's roommate, Al (Darryl Hickman) tries to show him how to walk acceptably, is moving and authentically played; when the headmaster's wife, Laura (Deborah Kerr), visits the local floozie, Ellie Martin (superbly played by Norma Crane) in the soda fountain, Minnelli makes the scene a symbolic, wordless encounter between the

jukebox Magdalene and the Ivy League Madonna, an interesting touch of character insight, and the contrast between Tom's interludes with the two women shows the gap between a moment of truth and the moment of agony.

Tea and Sympathy became much gentler and more annoyingly evasive on the screen, and its ending is unsatisfactory, with all the loose ends tidied up uncomfortably in autumnal flashbacks and reminiscences. Once again, Minnelli created a world not at all real, but inhabited by people whose vague familiarity made them attractive emblems of stylish semitragedy.

Designing Woman (1956) is uneven farce, cleverly written by George Wells, but the film lies somewhere between the screwball comedy of the 'thirties and a musical. The latter influence was supplied by the presence of Dolores Gray and Jack Cole, both of whom were allowed to sing and dance just a little, respectively, but they also managed to give hilarious performances. Minnelli also brought Gregory Peck and Lauren Bacall quite aptly into the comic pattern, and the luxurious backgrounds of Los Angeles and New York are representative of the American's dream of wealthy sophisticates living complacently in a slick world of material comfort. The humor tended to be obvious and heavy-handed most of the time, except for two sequences: a parody of a lovers' quarrel between Peck and Gray, in which she blandly drops a dish of ravioli into his lap, and a tumultuous fight sequence in a backstage alley, when Jack Cole, as a Minnelli grotesque, subdues several gangsters with high-kicking feet—but *Designing Woman* was merely a director's lark, after all.

Of all the influences from the world of art upon Minnelli, constantly moving him toward cinematic evocations of a bygone era, the influence of the French Impressionists is the strongest. *Gigi* (1957), based upon the novel by Colette, is one of the most ornate and colorful tributes to turn-of-the-century Paris ever made in the American cinema. In Paris, Minnelli joined forces with the famous British artist and designer, Cecil Beaton, to re-create an environment of elegance and imaginary innocence. It does not seem to have mattered that the film



musical's tradition had to be considered at all, for *Gigi* is really not a musical in the strictest cinematic sense. It is a glorified charade, rich in visual effect and as esoterically charming as an antique jewel box. The film's musical style is shamelessly borrowed by Lerner and Loewe from their stage success *My Fair Lady*, but the technique of "patter-recitative" for almost all of the songs is less acceptable on the screen, and *Gigi* seems oddly static because it has no dancing. Actually, one confronts here a sumptuous presentation of a standard cinematic observation: even a jaded and rich young man must undergo the ordinary man's discomfort of falling in love.

The story of the guileless *Gigi* (Leslie Caron), who is trained for the career of a courtesan by her Aunts Alicia and Hortense (Isabel Jeans and Hermione Gingold), is too slender a frame for the upholstery of Minnelli's images and Beaton's splashes of color, so that when Gaston Lachaille (Louis Jourdan) gives a masked ball, or ventures into Maxim's with his latest mistress, one completely forgets the plot; there is too much to look at in the backgrounds. The only moments in *Gigi* that are firmly based upon familiar musical traditions are Maurice Chevalier's numbers and when *Gigi*, Gaston, and Hortense sing "The Night They Invented Champagne."

However, Minnelli's use of the lyric hero in *Gigi* is brilliantly achieved, making Gaston more important than anyone else in the film. Gaston's long soliloquy and melodic utterances of the title song, excellent in conception and mood, are followed, later in the film, by a reprise of the number in purely photographic and musical terms. The orchestrations and camera elaborate Gaston's top-hatted silhouette against the nighttime streets and fountains of Paris as he roams, disconsolately silent, stunned by first love. It is a musical number unlike anything else ever seen upon the screen, an Impressionist mood-piece haunted by the sketches of Lautrec. The Trou-

TEA AND SYMPATHY:

(Top) American ritual: (Darryl Hickman and John Kerr).

(Bottom) Moment of agony: (John Kerr and Norma Crane).



The courtesan's way (Leslie Caron and Isabel Jeans).



Mistress and lover (Eva Gabor and Jacques Bergerac).

GIGI: The past recaptured.

The lyric hero and heroine (Louis Jourdan and Leslie Caron).

Maxim's 1900 (Louis Jourdan and Leslie Caron).



ville sequence quietly closes with a glimpse of Gaston and Gigi pulling a donkey across a sunset-golden beach, a vignette from the worlds of Renoir and Manet. With *Gigi*, Minnelli reaffirmed his position as a director primarily interested in the pictorial effect of the cinema. To him, the spectator's receptiveness to the subject matter of a film depends solely upon the visual pleasures given. It has not been difficult to convince critics of this point of view in the fields of comedy or musicals. The danger lies in Minnelli's tendency to also decorate dramatic situations based upon recognizable, commonplace American locales.

He has deliberately abandoned black and white photography and, ironically, not one of his dramatic films in color has been as poignant as *The Clock* or as stylistically cynical as *The Bad and the Beautiful*. The prevailing quality of *The Cobweb* is intellectual elegance; in *Tea and Sympathy*, sentiment instead of sarcasm dominates, and somehow color photography tends to shift the spectator's attention toward visual experience in itself, rather than bring about an awareness of the relationship of characters to life.

The Reluctant Debutante (1958) made no pretensions toward reality. William Douglas Home, adapting his stage comedy to the screen, poked fun at the weariness of the London "season" for debutantes, a relentless succession of balls and parties which had been the cause for sardonic amusement in England ever since the war. Minnelli made the film a "beau geste," a lighthearted toast to the end of a recent social era, in which Kay Kendall and Rex Harrison exhibit their sophisticated inanity. *The Reluctant Debutante* is successful because it depicts a world that cultivated artificiality and pretentiousness. The tempo of the film is set by Eddie Warren's society orchestra (subtly playing songs from Minnelli's early musicals at each party); and, in the midst of this polished comedy of ill manners, there is even a memorably bizarre character, out of Minnelli's gallery of comic grotesques, a toothy member of the Horse Guards, cleverly played by Peter Myers.

In his most recent film, *Some Came Running*



THE RELUCTANT DEBUTANTE: *Height of "The Season"* (Sandra Dee, Kay Kendall, Angela Lansbury and Rex Harrison).

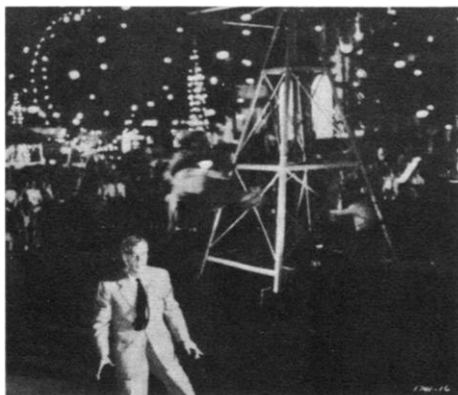
(1958), the director desperately tries to avoid entanglement in the amorphous novel by James Jones. Although the screenplay (John Patrick and Arthur Sheekman) captures the rough, bar-room dialogue with skill and realistic, humorous effectiveness, the story of a returned veteran and potential novelist, David Hirsh (Frank Sinatra) and his love affair with an emotionally repressed high school teacher (Martha Hyer) tends to throw the entire film off balance. The fictional town of Parkman, Indiana (the film was shot in Madison, Indiana), with its tawdry gin-mills contrasted with the mansions of suburbia, is excellently photographed and readily accepted—notably the teacher's extraordinary book-lined kitchen. But one is never convinced that the teacher, Miss French, is Jones' fictional conception of a contemporary Emily Dickinson, as he intended, and Sinatra's laconic personality is at its best in the raucous escapades in Smitty's Bar, not when exchanging platitudes with this remote creature. *Some Came Running* has some saving qualities, however, that must be considered. Confronted with the story, Minnelli concentrated upon grotesques: a witty braggart and gambler (Dean Martin) who never removes his ten-gallon hat, his otiose floozie (Carmen Phillips), and a Doll Tearsheet in Indiana named Ginny (Shirley MacLaine). Unreal to the point of fascination, but in a milieu of their own, these three and Sinatra have enough humanity in them to bring life to the sequences in which they



SOME CAME RUNNING: Minnelli's night-world.

(Top) Doll Tearsheet in Indiana (Frank Sinatra, Shirley MacLaine, Dean Martin, and Carmen Phillips).

(Bottom) Carnival terror (Steven Peck).



appear together. In another of Minnelli's symbolic encounters between tart and good woman, dialogue and music make the incident batheuc.

The totally photographic gesture of *Some Came Running*, what one must wait for in any Minnelli film, is offered in two visually compelling episodes. The surrender of Miss French to David is excitingly shot in semidarkness by cameraman William Daniels with a pinpoint of light catching the actress' eye; and toward the end of the film, during a centennial celebration, a crazed gunman is suddenly camera-struck against a crimson wall, outlined against violet alleys, seen through a twirling carousel, or the myriad lights of a Ferris wheel.

One feels that Minnelli does not think of *Some Came Running* as a failure; he is an experimentalist, still attempting to bring the elusive colors of real life to complete terms with the controlled colors of the screen. Whether he will succeed or not, one cannot say, but the artistic gestures in his films are of importance to all young filmmakers who look toward Hollywood's studios as a laboratory for creative rather than commercial expressions of cinematic art; the dilemma of Vincente Minnelli is theirs as well.

Film Reviews

The Seventh Seal

The Seventh Seal, the latest of Swedish director Ingmar Bergman's recent films to reach this country, is a triumphant declaration of what is occasionally and uniquely possible in the cinema—occasionally, since, as we discuss elsewhere in this issue, a personal commitment in film is rarely possible, and *uniquely*, since Bergman demonstrates a control over and synthesis of narrative, performance, and style which are

uniquely available in the cinema, and then only to its masters.

The film is set in fourteenth-century Sweden, at the height of the black plague. Disease, pestilence, fear are everywhere. Women give birth to monsters—children with the heads of calves—and death may at any time, and for anybody, overtake life. A young woman is suspected of being intimate with the Devil, and is to be burned as a witch. Priests drag gigantic crosses and lead supplicants through the streets, lashing